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SUBJECT: POLITICAL FUTURE FOR TOP TIMORESE GENERAL?

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¶1. SUMMARY: Major General Taur Matan Ruak, the current commander of the Timorese armed forces (F-FDTL), could stand as a candidate in the presidential elections in 2012. While TMR is a member of the independence generation that has dominated Timorese politics since the country's formal independence in 2002, he would be a "new" figure in the sense that he is not one of the three men - Xanana Gusmao, Jose Ramos-Horta, and Mari Alkitiri - that to date have monopolized the presidency and prime minister's office and are identified as part of the "1975 generation" of political leaders. TMR is most closely associated with Gusmao, his guerrilla army colleague during the Indonesian occupation, and if Gusmao decides to back him TMR would likely stand as the presidential candidate for Gusmao's CNRT party. END SUMMARY.

Early Life: Labor Organizer

¶2. Taur Matan Ruak (TMR) was born in the town of Baguia, District of Baucau, on October 10, 1956. He was the eldest son of eight children (five girls and three boys). In 1960 TMR moved to Dili to live with an uncle and in 1963 he started his primary studies, finishing in five years later in 1968.

¶3. In 1971 TMR obtained employment at a pousada or hotel in Baucau. Despite his tender age he organized an employee strike, demanding increased salaries, better food and conditions, and greater respect for employee dignity. The Dili Court ruled against the striking employees, undermining TMR's confidence in the judicial institutions of the Portuguese administration. In 1973 TMR got another hotel job, this time at the Hotel Resende in Dili, and a year later organized another strike against unfair conditions. The case was again submitted to the Dili Court but it ended once again without a satisfactory resolution. TMR's activism was part of a broader movement for labor rights in Timor-Leste; Ramos-Horta and Gusmao were also organizing strikes around this time.

¶4. The Portuguese colonial administration began a process of decolonization in May 1974 and Timorese political parties were

encouraged to register. After a brief civil war in August 1975, the left-wing political organization FRETILIN (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) emerged as the interim administration of the fledgling nation. TMR, still not yet 20 years old, supported the new administration.

Rise to FALINTIL Commander

15. When Indonesia invaded Timor-Leste in December 1975, TMR, who was still in Dili, took to the hills with FRETILIN's military wing, FALINTIL (Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor), and its first commander, Nicolau Lobato. During the first three years of the war, during which time an estimated 100,000 Timorese were killed, TMR participated in battles against the Indonesian military in Dili, Aileu, Maubisse, Ossu, Venilale, Uatulari and finally Laga, on the north-eastern coast. He steadily rose through the FALINTIL ranks in a series of command positions centered on FALINTIL's strongholds in the East. Lobato was killed in 1978, however, and by the end of that year FALINTIL's ability to mount sustained operations in direct confrontation to the Indonesians was greatly diminished. FALINTIL increasingly turned to guerilla tactics, and TMR organized many of those efforts in the East. He was briefly captured in March 1979 in Viqueue but escaped after 23 days.

16. TMR remained at large throughout the 1980's, coordinating guerilla commando actions across the country. He became FALINTIL Chief of Staff in November 1992 after the capture of

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Xanana Gusmao and rose to the position of Operational Commander in March 1998.

Popular Consultation and Transition to F-FDTL

17. On August 30, 1999, the Timorese people voted overwhelmingly for their independence from Indonesia in a UN-supervised referendum. From his jail cell in Jakarta FALINTIL Commander-in-Chief Gusmao ordered all FALINTIL personnel confined to cantonments, for fear that any armed engagement with the Indonesians would jeopardize the holding of the ballot.

Despite the intense violence and destruction that both preceded and followed the referendum, TMR successfully carried out Gusmao's difficult order and prevented FALINTIL guerillas from taking action even though the Timorese population begged for protection against rampaging pro-Indonesia forces.

18. On August 20, 2000, on the 25th anniversary of FALINTIL's founding, Xanana Gusmao resigned from FALINTIL and TMR was appointed the Commander-in-Chief, the last individual to hold that position. FALINTIL subsequently became the official armed forces of East Timor on February 1, 2001. The new force honored its historical roots by taking the name FALINTIL-Defense Force of Timor-Leste (F-FDTL). TMR became F-FDTL's first and thus far only commander, with the rank of Brigadier General.

Role in the 2006 Crisis

19. TMR was a central figure in the April-May 2006 crisis which

erupted around the dismissal from the F-FDTL of nearly 600 "petitioners," soldiers drawn mainly from the western part of the country that alleged discrimination in favor of soldiers from the East. TMR was accused by some of not paying sufficient attention to his soldiers' concerns and allowing the situation to escalate as far as it did. TMR's house was attacked at the end of May 2006, necessitating a negotiated rescue of his children trapped inside.

¶10. The UN Special Commission of Inquiry (COI) that investigated the 2006 crisis concluded that TMR ordered the F-FDTL to arm two hundred civilians shortly after his house was attacked. TMR claimed the additional personnel were needed as "reservists" to bolster the F-FDTL's troop levels, which had been depleted during the crisis. The COI found no basis in Timorese law for arming reservists in this way and recommend that TMR and others be prosecuted in Timorese courts for illegal weapons transfer. Timor-Leste's Prosecutor General announced in December 2009 that she was dropping the weapons investigation and would not bring charges against TMR since there was no evidence of unlawfulness or culpability.

Political Prospects

¶11. TMR in recent months has made public statements mentioning the need for the old generation at F-FDTL to retire, including him. He was promoted to Major General in November 2009 as his second-in-command rose to Brigadier General, but PM Gusmao denied that the moves were a sign that a change in command was imminent. Nevertheless, TMR is mentioned as a possible presidential candidate in the elections scheduled for mid-2012, particularly if the independent incumbent Jose Ramos-Horta decides not to run again.

¶12. The most likely fit for TMR is the National Congress for

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Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT) party led by PM Gusmao, either as its candidate or with its tacit backing as an independent as Ramos-Horta did in 2007. CNRT Secretary-General Dionisio Babo stressed that CNRT is a party that values Timor-Leste's history, its resistance and its veterans and former combatants. He acknowledged that recent party meetings have discussed the possibility of CNRT supporting TMR to run for President. Babo believed the majority of the party is in favor of this option, but underscored that Gusmao has not revealed his preferences yet.

COMMENT

¶13. The 2012 election cycle will likely contain both presidential and national parliamentary elections. The big three political figures - Gusmao, Ramos-Horta and Alkatiri - will be 65, 62 and 62 years old, respectively, in 2012. Alkatiri is anxious to lead Fretilin into the elections to regain the prime ministership he lost in 2007, but the futures of Gusmao and Ramos-Horta are less clear. Should one or both of them step aside, TMR would be among a small group of candidates to replace them.

¶14. TMR's command of the F-FDTL and his guerilla history give him a national profile that few of his potential rivals would be able to match. He is a charismatic leader known throughout the

country; his visits even to the remotest areas bring out crowds of villagers shouting out his name. TMR's high profile is colored, however, by his role in the still divisive experience of 2006, when regional, institutional and generational rivalries combined to produce the worst political violence in Timor-Leste's history as an independent country. He has never held political office and is thus viewed by many as better suited to the more ceremonial role of the presidency than the leadership of a political party.

¶15. TMR is favorably disposed toward the U.S. and has welcomed increased military to military bilateral engagement as a valuable way to professionalize the F-FDTL. He is leading an overhaul of the F-FDTL as an institution and hopes to dramatically change the force in the next 5-10 years. He is a thoughtful interlocutor even though his formal education ended when he was 12 years old. Although he prefers the use of a translator TMR is a strong English speaker with the ability to discuss complex issues ranging from long-term strategy to tactical guerilla warfare. He comfortably holds his own with colleagues from other nations, and has extensive experience dealing with the senior military leaders of the Australian, New Zealand and United Nations contingents present in Timor-Leste since its birth as a country ten years ago.

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